

## Samuel Beckett *Waiting for Godot*

### Introduction

Samuel Barclay Beckett [1906-1989] is an Irish novelist, poet and playwright who wrote in English and French. Born and educated in Dublin, Beckett moved to Paris in 1928 as a school teacher. There he met James Joyce, the famous Irish writer. Their association had a profound impact on his literary career. His first critical essay, "Dante... Bruno. Vico...Joyce." [1929] justifies Joyce's unique literary style. His admiration for certain aspects of Joyce's style is reflected in his works. *Waiting for Godot*, is his first and most famous play. Originally written in French as *En Attendant Godot* [1948], it was first staged in a small theatre in Paris in 1953. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969.

### Important Works

#### Prose

- *Proust* [1931]

#### Novels

- *Murphy* [1935]
- *Malone* [1951]
- *The Unnamable* [1960]

## Poetry

- *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* [1935]

## Plays

- *Waiting for Godot* [1948]
- *Endgame* [1957]
- *Krapp's Last Tale* [1958]
- *Happy Days* [1961]
- *Play* [1963]

Samuel Beckett is regarded as one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. He was probably one among the last of the Modernist authors. He had great regard for specific traits of Joyce's literary style which is mirrored in most of his earlier texts. An avant-garde writer, he experimented with many new concepts in his writings. He is considered one of the greatest exponents of what Martin Esslin called the 'Theatre of the Absurd'.

## Learning Outcome

- To gain a general awareness of 'Absurd Theatre'
- To appreciate the avant-garde nature of modern drama
- To identify various themes incorporated in modern plays
- To evaluate language, form and content of modernist literature
- To analyse the universal relevance of the play today

## Absurd

The concept of 'absurd' is the central concern in "The Myth of Sisyphus" [1942], the renowned philosophical essay by Albert Camus. The essay begins with a thoughtful logical query, an 'absurd reasoning', whether life in this world is worth living or not?

According to the myth, Sisyphus, King of Corinth was eternally punished by gods. He had to roll a huge stone up to the top of a hill. When the stone reached the top, it would immediately roll down again.

Man finds the possibility of human suffering and the inevitability of death totally unreasonable. When man is confronted with the realization that the world is unreasonable, he longs for reason and happiness. Camus elucidates that 'the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of this world'. Camus used the Sisyphus myth as a parallel to highlight man's futile quest to understand the absurdity of human existence.

## Absurd Drama

The critic Martin Esslin used the term 'absurd' to label the innovative unconventional style of modern plays in *The Theatre of the Absurd* [1963]. Absurd drama had a very short life as a literary genre due to its avant-garde nature. Some of the major Absurd dramatists were Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov and Tom Stoppard. Important absurd plays are Jean Genet's *The Maids* [1947], Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* [1950] Adamov's *Ping- Pong* [1955]. Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* [1966] is a well-known absurdist version of William Shakespeare's tragedy, *Hamlet*.

Absurd drama has many characteristic features like:

- violation of traditional rules of drama
- lack of coherent story and well-made plot
- dialogues are fragmented, meaningless clichés or nonsense noises
- language as tool of non-communication.
- futile actions
- use of fantasy and black humour
- characters are puppet-like and helpless victims of blind fate
- bare and desolate settings
- fluid and indefinite sequence of time

Common themes of Absurd drama are

- Anxiety / Angst
- Alienation

Anxiety and alienation are relatively modern phenomena and major recurring themes in twentieth century literature.

*Anxiety* is probably the medium in which many or most people used to live and think in the later twentieth century. According to Steven Bowman, anxiety is a generalized, often debilitating apprehension of impending personal destruction. Sigmund Freud has attempted a psychoanalytic explanation of anxiety. Fear generally has an internal or external focus, an object. For example, one may fear dogs or snakes. Anxiety means worrying intensely about something, which may not really happen. Also it is unfocussed, like for e.g. worry about failure in examinations or death of someone you love.

*Alienation* is derived from the Latin word 'alienatio'. Nathan.A. Cervo describes alienation as a literary theme, which is the estrangement of the literary character or persona from something with which he/she has been, should be, or would like to be in conformity and consonance. It is the inability to rationalize and conform to one's essential nature, to adapt to the limits of humanness. Cervo establishes six basic types of alienation based on the entity from which the literary characters may experience estrangement. Alienation may be:

- (1) from the physical environment.
- (2) from one's own epoch, as in T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*.
- (3) social alienation-from the community /or the values of society.
- (4) separation from the Creator and the cosmic order.
- (5) from self, expressed in literature by devices such as the soliloquy.
- (6) existential, estrangement from the condition of being human.

Absurd drama deals mostly with personal issues concerning the self. Hence it comprises of circumstances which are predictably archetypes of anxiety and alienation. Martin Esslin concludes *The Theatre of the Absurd* with the observation that the dramatic riddles posed by absurd dramatists offer no clear-cut solutions. They do not explain the complex,

unfathomable and paradoxical riddle of human existence.

### ***Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett**

#### Dramatis Personae

Estragon [Gogo], Vladimir [Didi], Lucky, Pozzo, a boy, Godot

*Waiting for Godot* was one of the most revolutionary plays of the twentieth century. In this play, Samuel Beckett experimented with ‘minimalism’ – a technique employed to create artistic effects with minimum possible means. When the play was first performed, many spectators left the theatre early because they could not understand anything. The audience was totally confused at the strange dialogues, characterization and lack of plot/story. Some critics also see the play as a reflection of Beckett’s own military experiences during the Second World War.

The play is a tragicomedy in two acts. It has only five characters who actually appear on the stage and another character, Godot who doesn’t appear on the stage at all. The whole play revolves around the protagonists, Estragon and Vladimir, nicknamed Gogo and Didi respectively. The title refers to the protagonists waiting endlessly for Godot. They wait on a deserted country road, with nothing else in the background except a willow tree.

#### Summary of the Plot

##### **Act I**

The first act begins in the evening, on a lonely country road, near a tree with no leaves. A middle-aged tramp Estragon is seated on a low mound, struggling to take off his boots. When

Vladimir arrives, Estragon gives up his frustrated attempts exclaiming, 'Nothing to be done'. His words resound throughout the play emphasizing the absurdity of life. Vladimir surprisingly comes up with a rather strange, but philosophical response:

"I'm beginning to come around to that opinion. All my life, I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable. You haven't yet tried everything."

The very first interaction between the two main characters is quite significant. Critics have remarked that Beckett creates the right atmosphere of the play with Vladimir's abstract dialogue. It reflects the true nature of human existence in the modern age. Man seems to be unable to find a worthy reason to live happily. Yet he lives on with hope and continues to try anything which will help him to discover the reason for his worldly existence.

Beckett presents his characters as prototypes of the post-war modern age man. They are always tormented with worries of disease, poverty, homelessness, hunger, sufferings and other contemporary issues. Estragon dressed in rags, remarks he spent the night in a ditch and was beaten. He keeps complaining about pain in his feet. During their rambling chat they discuss Christ who was crucified with two thieves on each side. Vladimir peers inside his hat for a while and refers to his aching bladder illness. He wonders why only one of the thieves was saved by Christ while the other was damned to hell. They talk about visiting the Holy Land where Estragon wants to swim and be happy. They discuss the four Gospels in The Bible, in which only one mentions the episode of thieves crucified on either side of Christ. Vladimir asks why everyone believes and whether they should repent. Estragon replies bitterly that it is because 'People are such bloody ignorant apes'. Vladimir mentions that Estragon should have been a poet. They also refer to a respectable time in the past when they had stood hand in hand on top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

Estragon abruptly advises Vladimir to leave the place. Vladimir then reminds him of the purpose why they are there. They have been instructed to wait for Godot by the willow tree with no leaves and hence looks more like a shrub or a bush. So they are doubtful whether they are waiting for Godot in the right place. They are not sure whether Godot will come, yet they are determined to continue the 'merciless waiting'. When they stop talking, Estragon falls asleep. Vladimir wakes him up because he feels lonely, but prevents Estragon from sharing his nightmarish dream. They contemplate hanging themselves on the tree, but are hesitant. Finally they decide to consult Godot when he arrives.

More pointless dialogues follow till Pozzo and Lucky come on stage. Pozzo carries a whip and drives Lucky with a rope passed around his neck. Lucky carries a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a greatcoat. Vladimir and Estragon mistake Pozzo for Godot. Pozzo introduces himself as the landowner and wants to know who Godot is. The tramps describe Godot as an acquaintance whom they have never ever met. The tyrannical Pozzo continues cracking the whip and abusing Lucky who is obviously his slave. Then he opens the basket, sits down, eats a piece of chicken and drinks from a bottle of wine. Meanwhile the tramps inspect Lucky who seems to be an expert in sleeping on his feet. They see the bruise on his neck made by the rope and wonder why he barely talks. Estragon requests Pozzo whether he can feast on the discarded chicken bones. Pozzo agrees after making sure that Lucky doesn't want them. Vladimir protests that it is a scandal to ill-treat Lucky and wants to leave immediately. Pozzo reminds him of their appointment with Godot. Pozzo reveals that he is taking Lucky the fair, hoping to sell him at a good price. This news makes Lucky weep, but when Estragon offers to wipe his tears, he stops crying and kicks Estragon. Pozzo responds rationally:



“The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops. The same is true of the laugh. Let us not then speak ill of our generation, it is not any unhappier than its predecessors. Let us not speak well of it either.”

The tramps' encounter with the odd couple, Pozzo and Lucky seem symbolic in many ways. Beckett seems to suggest that human beings are fated to undergo suffering in different ways. The four characters wear bowler hats which they take off at times and peer inside. Pozzo orders Lucky to think aloud and he starts shouting gibberish. After Pozzo exits the stage with Lucky, the tramps again debate whether or not to continue waiting for Godot. The first act ends with the arrival of the Boy, the messenger of Godot. He informs them that Godot is unable to come but will meet them surely the next day. The tramps interrogate him to get more useful information about Godot, but fail to do so. The Boy leaves and they decide to leave the place. However they do not move.

There is no advancement of the plot in the first act. The tramps are back to square one at the end. They continue to maintain their status quo, waiting for Godot. Through Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, Beckett seems to highlight the human condition prevalent during the modern age. Man, though disappointed and frustrated with life, does nothing to change his condition. Instead, modern man waits passively and relies on hope to sustain him and enable him to face the future.

## Act II

The second act is set in the same surroundings. The tree has sprouted four or five leaves. Estragon had left his boots there the previous night. Vladimir enters agitatedly and starts singing about a dog beaten to death because it stole a crust of bread. Soon Estragon enters barefoot and head bowed. He is sad because he was beaten again the previous night. Vladimir prompts him to recollect the events of the previous day. The only thing that gives them hope to see through the day is the fact that the tree is no longer black and bare. Beckett seems to indicate that the change in the tree may inspire the tramps to move on. Pozzo and Lucky have moved on but the tramps decide to wait for Godot.

Estragon is unsure about the passage of time and what they did during the previous day. To pass the time Vladimir suggests helping Estragon put on his boots again. Estragon exclaims that the boots are not his as they are not tight. This leads them to an absurd thought that somebody must have switched the boots in the night. They seem restless and look into the distance. Vladimir asks Estragon why they should be stuck there forever doing nothing. They notice Lucky's hat where it had fallen on the ground. Vladimir puts it on and then both of them fool around. Vladimir imitates Lucky and tells Estragon to imitate Pozzo and bully him. Suddenly they hear someone coming and try to hide behind the tree. Then they move to opposite sides of the stage, but nobody appears. Soon they start arguing and call each other names. Finally they reconcile and embrace and think of doing something while waiting.

Pozzo and Lucky appear as master and slave again. Pozzo who is now blind, falls down and calls for help. Estragon again mistakes him to be Godot. The tramps wonder why Lucky hasn't escaped from blind Pozzo. Instead of helping Pozzo to get up, Vladimir chats with

Estragon, contemplating about their fate. Vladimir states that there is only one thing that is clear in the midst of all confusion. That is the fact that they are waiting for Godot and that they have faithfully kept their appointment. Pozzo keeps calling out for help and offers up to two hundred francs. This spurs the tramps into action and Vladimir states vehemently:

“Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us!”

Vladimir however fails in his attempt and falls down calling for help. But Estragon refuses to help unless Vladimir promises to let him leave the place. He stretches out his hand to Vladimir and falls down. The scene is extremely tragicomic, with three of them lying on the ground and calling out for help. The tramps get up on their own after some time and help Pozzo to get up. Estragon wakes up Lucky who is mute and then master and slave exit the stage. It seems strange that only Vladimir remembers the events of the previous day.

The Boy returns at the end of Act II with a message from Godot, again asking for a Mr. Albert. Boy doesn't recognise Vladimir, so he assumes that this is another Boy. The message conveyed is identical, that Godot is unable to come and will surely meet them without fail the next day. Boy reveals that Godot has a white beard and runs off stage. The play ends with the tramps standing in front of the tree seriously considering the possibility of hanging themselves. But they do not have a rope, so they think of returning with a rope the next day. Vladimir declares that they will not hang themselves if Godot comes to save them. They talk

of going away from the place but they do not move. Vladimir's helpless words confirm their endless fate.

“We wait. We are bored. (He throws up his hand.) No, don't protest, we are bored to death, there's no denying it. Good. A diversion comes along and what do we do? We let it go to waste. Come, let's get to work! (He advances towards the heap, stops in his stride.) In an instant all will vanish and we'll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!”

The end of the play suggests infinite possibilities of waiting. Beckett indicates that human beings are so opposed to change that they would rather prefer to remain inactive and unproductive. Vladimir and Estragon do not wish to change, in doing so they represent an accurate portrayal of modern man.

Beckett's tragicomedy actually mirrors human existence. Mary H Childers remarks that Beckett's world is not the traditional one of comedy.

“The events during the time of the action could be understood as having taught the characters, for example, that they have no power to change the laws that they have come to know by experience. The nature of human beings may be to try to change these necessary laws of the universe, and human learning may precisely mean learning that such laws are not subject to change. That the spectator sees generally all the figures as fools is an acceptable assumption. They are usually of the lowest classes, persons so denuded of what we take to be the necessities of Western human life, persons whose language is either so elemental or so preposterous that the readers or viewers have some difficulty taking them seriously. At first, they seem so distant that we, the real people, are out of danger. Then at some point, Beckett makes us realize that they are us and we are them. The human family is complete and comprehensive. Their foolishness mirrors our own, but theirs is at such an elemental level

that we need some time and determination to be able to see that. Beckett's fools are transcendent at the unexpected end of the spectrum.”

## Characterization

### The Protagonists

- **Vladimir** [ Didi / Mr. Albert] : A middle-aged tramp, called Didi by Estragon [Gogo], also addressed as Mr. Albert by the Boy. He represents a typical character in an absurd play, a helpless puppet in the cruel hands of fate. He appears more focussed and determined than any other character in the play. But he is also easily hurt, irritated and provoked and at times he responds with philosophical remarks. He shows his deep concern for his friend, Estragon and constantly encourages him to ‘wait’. Only he protests against Pozzo’s inhuman treatment of Lucky, revealing his humane nature.

Vladimir is the only person who recollects past events vividly. He is more optimistic of meeting Godot and insists that they should wait until he comes. He firmly believes that if Godot comes they will be saved.

- **Estragon** [Gogo]: Nicknamed Gogo, Estragon is the first character shown on the stage. Like Didi he is also a middle-aged tramp dressed in rags. He appears submissive and timid when compared to his buddy Vladimir. Estragon allows

Vladimir to make decisions and follows them. He is more sensitive but unpredictable in his actions. He willingly accepts defeat, sleeps a lot, dreams of happy times. Estragon is so forgetful and doesn't remember anything that happened in the recent past. He is rather confused and sometimes even forgets why they are there and Godot's name. There are references to him being beaten during the night suggesting that he is the weaker of the two. His feet hurt and he is obsessed with taking his boots on and off. He is inquisitive, and doubts the existence of Godot. Unlike Didi, he often thinks of the possibility of leaving the place and moving on.

Vladimir and Estragon are poles apart in character but they seem to complement each other. They are realistic portrayals of modern man caught up in the mire of suffering. Only hope in salvation sustains modern life, and man waits endlessly hoping to be saved.

### **The Master and Slave**

- **Pozzo:** In Act I, Pozzo is a bald, tyrannical figure who derives a sadistic pleasure in abusing his servant Lucky. He treats Lucky like an animal and controls him with a rope passed around his neck. He cracks his whip continuously to make Lucky serve him. Pozzo is a wealthy landlord, least bothered with the fate of the tramps. He shows interest in meeting Godot but leaves soon as he is planning to sell Lucky in a fair. Shockingly the second act portrays a blind, helpless and frightened Pozzo. Still he possesses his 'menial' Lucky, controlled with a rope as before. Pozzo falls to the ground and lies there calling for help. He is portrayed in a pitiable condition and strangely doesn't remember his previous encounter with the tramps.
- **Lucky:** The unhappy, but devoted slave of Pozzo, Lucky is portrayed identically in both the acts. His fate does not change for better or for worse. His movements are

controlled by his master who has passed a rope around his neck. He is treated badly like an animal, and is burdened with a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a greatcoat. He serves only to entertain Pozzo. When ordered to think aloud, he surprisingly responds with gibberish sentences. Critics have interpreted Lucky's dialogues as a desperate attempt to communicate his miserable condition. In the second act, Lucky is mute and inactive and sleeps for the most part.

Pozzo and Lucky depict binary opposites. The autocratic owner and the subservient slave who refuses to leave him. Beckett exposes the sad state of modern man enslaved by several worldly masters.

### **The Messenger**

- **Boy:** A messenger arrives towards the end of both acts, with a message from Godot. He asks for a Mr Albert. The dramatist calls him Boy. He is a nameless character – another feature of absurd drama. Vladimir assumes that he is Mr Albert and receives the message that Godot will not come. The Boy informs them in both the acts that Godot will surely come the next day. In the first act Boy hides for a while, because he is scared of Pozzo and his whip. He later comes on stage after the exit of Pozzo and Lucky. In the second act Vladimir discovers it is not the same Boy, but possibly his brother. The Boy reveals that he looks after goats for Godot. He tells them that Godot is good to him, but also discloses that Godot beats the boy's brother. Before running off stage the Boy also reveals the fact that Godot has a white beard.

### **The 'Saviour'**

- **Godot:** Godot is described as the sole source of salvation in the entire play. The protagonists' only aim in life is to wait endlessly for Godot, to come and save them. They firmly believe that only Godot can deliver them from their sufferings. Without

the 'waiting' it seems as if their very existence is absolutely meaningless. Critics have commented that Godot actually stands for 'God'. Through the character of Godot, Beckett has illustrated a common human condition. Human beings wait and wish for something or the other, throughout their entire lives and Godot can be seen a similar objective.

### Themes

Critics have identified many themes, but *Waiting for Godot* "is a mystery wrapped in an enigma"

Some of the main themes in the play are waiting, anxiety, alienation, nihilism, existentialism, vain expectancy, flux of time, boredom, eternal recurrence, uncertainty, denial, friendship, suffering and so on.

### Conclusion

What is most fascinating about *Waiting for Godot* is that it doesn't really end. The structure of the plot is circular as the play begins and formally ends with waiting for Godot. The audience is fully aware that the waiting goes on and on. When it was staged in London in 1955, Kenneth Tynan remarked, "It has no plot, no climax, no denouement; no beginning, no middle and no end."

an astounding impact on the audience/readers because of this very fact. It signifies the eternal recurrence of human life in all its complexities. The tragi-comic elements emphasise the helplessness and vulnerability of the characters who do nothing at all to change their destiny.



Beckett does not intend to convey a universal message through his play. He just presents an experience and portrays the modern human condition truthfully to his audience.